

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 13, 2011

Agenda Item: Dugas Farms Conservation Easement Proposal

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Approval of Final Rule/Action

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

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Background

FWP is partnering with USDA Farm and Ranchlands Protection Program, PPL Montana, MT Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, NWTF, SCI, PF and landowner donation to purchase a conservation easement from Dugas Farms. The FWP Commission endorsed the course of action on April 17, 2008. The 800-acre Dugas Farms property is located 2 miles south of Ulm in Cascade County. Dugas Farms possesses riparian, emergent and forested wetlands, shrub and native grassland communities important to many wildlife species, including deer, antelope, upland game birds, waterfowl and numerous non-game wildlife species. The property, which contains 5 miles of Missouri River frontage, is managed as a working farm primarily for wheat and cattle production, while maintaining and/or enhancing wildlife habitats throughout. The Missouri River has some of the best year-round cover for white-tailed deer, waterfowl, upland game birds and non-game species in Region 4. The landowners currently allow access for big game, waterfowl, upland game bird hunting, along with wildlife viewing.

Public Involvement Process & Results

A public comment period was established for the EA, Management Plan and Socioeconomic Analysis from Aug. 10-Sept. 10, 2010. A public meeting was held at the Ulm School on Aug. 25, 2010; 19 persons attended. Written comments totaled 27 (25 supportive of Proposed Action, 2 opposed to Proposed Action). Consideration and evaluation of public comment is distilled in the Decision Notice to the EA. All comments remain on file at the Great Falls FWP office for public review.

Alternatives and Analysis

Proposed Action—FWP to purchase, hold and monitor a conservation easement on Dugas Farms.

Alternative A - No Action—Dugas Farms would continue to be managed as in the past but there would be no guarantee of the preservation of agricultural values, wildlife habitat, open space, historic sites, recreational values and other resources as they are found on the ranch.

Alternative B - Fee Title Purchase—The landowner initiated the conservation easement process with FWP and at no point expressed interest in fee title sale or a long-term lease.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends approval by the FWP Commission to proceed with purchasing a conservation easement from Dugas Farms utilizing FWP's Habitat Montana and Upland Game Bird Program funds with cooperation from partner dollars. This project will conserve and protect important riparian/wetland habitats along the Missouri River while providing public hunting and wildlife viewing access into perpetuity on Dugas Farms.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission authorize the Department to acquire the 800-acre Dugas Farms conservation easement.